

Jordan C. Lewans: My submission to the Department of Canadian Heritage on the Renewal of the Canadian Museum Policy

<https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/campaigns/renewal-museum-policy/guidelines.html>

The following is my response to the material written in the above Government of Canada webpage.

It was submitted to politiquemuseale-museumpolicy@pch.gc.ca and advocacy@museums.ca by myself on 28-3-02023.

Theme 1: the role of museums in society

What role do you think museums play in Canada's society?

Canada has been an economically and culturally dynamic country since the founding of Confederation, and before then as well. I don't see this as inherently either good or bad - it is simply an effect of the fact that we are a huge, resource-rich assortment of lands between the Arctic, Atlantic, and Pacific oceans. The development of these lands has almost always rested on business interests, often entwined with political and cultural interests. Business and economics makes interesting and sometimes strange bedfellows, and the resulting situations have made Canada a collection of unique colloids. Canada is not one society, but a series of coexisting, sometimes co-mingling societies.

Canadians may like to celebrate themselves for their diversity and multiculturalism. No doubt these may be enriching to us - but they also can be isolating: isolation of Francophone Canadians from the rest of Canada due to the language barrier; isolation in First Peoples' reserves due to their physical and cultural remoteness; isolation of Anglophone Canadians from their ancestral cultures (e.g. multigenerational Chinese-Canadians who speak only English); religious and political convictions segmenting Canadians off into cultural solitudes to enable them to avoid exposure to cultures they would prefer not to interact with... the list of uncomfortable facts goes on.

In spite of having a much shorter recorded history than many other nation-states, the average Canadian unfortunately does not have much knowledge of Canadian history. They are ignorant not only of simple

historical facts like who all our prime ministers, but also of antiquated lifestyles, mindsets, philosophies, and technologies which dictated how and why the people of Canada's past lived. This leaves their philosophical immune system susceptible to presentism. The toppling of statues of Canadian historical figures by angry mobs and the purging of placenames of dead Euro-Canadians whose legacies are no longer as popular are examples of an intolerant and uneducated population that has only a very narrow interpretation of Canadian history.

The core and intrinsic purpose of the museum is, to preserve artefacts. Secondly the museum is a place of entertainment for some and of research for others. The vast majority of Canadian museums are small institutions, mostly operated by volunteers whose work is a labour of love and without whose effort the life and times of days gone by in their respective communities would be lost to the sands of time. The second largest category of Canadian museums, I believe, would be the royal provincial museums - general-purpose institutions that display a combination of natural and social histories of their respective provinces.

It is not for the curatorial or executive staff at any of these museums to cast judgment on or to endorse everything that could potentially be associated with the artefacts they hold, but rather that in keeping them, they acknowledge the people and the stories behind those artefacts.

What are the key challenges museums will need to overcome if they are to play a meaningful role in society?

In our present era, I believe the gravest threat that Canadian museums face is attack (through illegal and even legal means) by self-righteous cultural revolutionaries (sometimes colloquially and disparagingly dubbed "wokeists") who view Canada's "settler culture" as illegitimate and genocidal.

It was not so many years ago that China underwent a "Cultural Revolution" in which countless antiquities and tomes were lost to the flames set by radical revisionists. Those who think that "that could never happen in Canada", I see as victims of normalcy bias, and their refusal to acknowledge this threat is part of the problem. An inability to recognise a problem is a problem unto itself.

I understand that many if not most of us who work in museums are old souls; we feel more at peace with antiquity than with the present.

However, most of the people of Canada function as creations of their own time. Although the section *Why Renew the Policy?* states that a majority of Canadians visited a museum or heritage site in 2019, the reason, duration, and meaningfulness of each of these visits varies. Most artefacts get no more than a few seconds of viewing from an average visitor, if they have the good fortune of being on display at all instead of in storage. The amount of attention a particular exhibit receives on a given day may correlate to its extraordinariness, but value is always relative and is not always readily apparent. It is not the position of any one curator, director, or politician to cast a snap judgment as to whether or not a certain artefact should be wiped from existence.

ALL ARTEFACTS HAVE SOME ABILITY TO OFFEND SOMEBODY. A display of antique liquor bottles (common in most community museums) may offend a visitor whose friend or sibling died in a drunk-driving crash. A display of firearms (such as the fantastic collection in the Fred Light Museum in Battleford, Saskatchewan) may offend a visitor who knew somebody who died in a shooting. A Renaissance Era painting of the ascension of Jesus to Heaven may offend an iconoclastic Christian who adheres to a Puritan, literal interpretation of the Second Commandment. Taxidermised animals often offend visitors of the animal rights persuasion. Thus, if a museum's primary concern is "will this exhibit offend somebody?", they will see no other option but to close their doors to the public. Private, invitation-only museums may take their place. Nicholas Roerich would be ashamed.

It is thus the responsibility of heritage professionals and museum volunteers alike to resist attack - both from top-down and from mass culture - on their artefacts and the heritage they represent. Events of the twentieth century - the works of art in Europe that were plundered between 1930 and 1945, the burning of Yugoslav libraries for containing books with the 'wrong' alphabet, the intersectarian violence in the former British Mandate of Palestine, the Khmer Rouge regime's execution of artists and professors, and of course the abovementioned Chinese "Cultural Revolution" - are evidence enough for me that Canadians should not take the security of cultural heritage for granted.

What should museums continue to do to remain relevant to society?

Museums should not judge their viability the same way as for-profit enterprises do. I believe that "needs" and "wants" are relative, and so I amalgamate the two terms into one - "desire". Heritage institutions provide for a human desire - to be connected to something wider, to see where one has come from, and to explore that which is extraordinary. However, the frequency of which one needs to fulfil different desires varies widely. Thus, a museum should not contrast its foot traffic with that of, for example, a grocery store. Relevance, as with "value", is not always readily apparent.

What could the Government of Canada do to help museums fulfil their role in society?

The mission of the museum is to preserve and purvey physical history to the public, just as it is the mission of the school to preserve and purvey literacy to the public. Thus, I believe that the museum is ultimately an educational institution - falling under provincial jurisdiction according to Section 93 of the Constitution Act. I therefore believe that it is not the place of the Government of Canada to be formulating any sort of national museum policy, nor should taxpayers of one province be obliged to provide funding for the upkeep of heritage institutions in another province.

What do you think museums in the future will look like?

Given that the word "future" gives me an unstated timeline, I will limit my thoughts to the next hundred years.

As I mentioned above, most of Canada's museums are small community museums, operated by volunteers. These staff may treasure their community's heritage, but passion is not always a substitute for education and skill. Many of these museums are housed in early twentieth century edifices whose upkeep is makeshift, and given the severe climate in this country, most of these structures will not survive the coming decades. I think, as a major example, of the "Prairie sentinels" - the wooden grain elevators built in the previous century that graced the horizons of my homeland. In a landscape with few landmarks, the grain elevator was once the sign

for people for where they were arriving throughout their travels. Artists such as Glen Scrimshaw have blessed us with depictions of these idyllic old-time scenes. Unfortunately, given their building material and their very un-streamlined design, the wooden grain elevator's presence in our settlements was only ephemeral. Having stood for years of use and being beaten by the elements, they've largely been rendered unsanitary and structurally unsound for both their original use and for preservation as historic buildings, and have had to come down.

It is therefore important for small community museums whose collections are housed in deteriorating structures to plan for the time for these buildings to receive the tattoo of the red X of condemnation. It is better to be ready well in advance to rehouse the artefacts than to rest on mere hope that a building won't come crashing down under the weight of heavy snow or the pressure of high wind, destroying the treasures it had been housing.

Theme 2: resilience and sustainability in the museum sector

What makes a heritage institution sustainable?

Most of the artefacts in this country are held indoors. With few exceptions, most artefacts require some degree of controls to prevent deterioration. As I touched on in the previous question, I believe that having a strong and secure building with proper climate controls must come first and foremost. Secondarily, a museum must be able to secure both dedicated staff and operating funds. Without these, what we have is not a museum, but a storage locker. Thirdly (and not least in importance) is that the artefacts within the museum must be valued by those who live and work in proximity to them - or at least, they must not be loathed. If what artefacts represent are loathed, they are at risk of destruction at the hands of zealots (think the destruction of the Greco-Roman ruins of Palmyra at the hands of ISIL, or the torching of antique Canadian churches in 02021).

How can heritage institutions find a more stable financial footing?

I have been fortunate to work in several museums across western Canada, thanks in part on a couple of these to Young Canada Works. In all of them, other grants were also used. This tells me that

museums are not profitable on their own. An average visitor will not give more than a little spare change to a museum donation box, if that, unless required to buy a pass in. A business being profitable does not necessarily make it more desirable or moral; if that were the case, the illegal narcotics trade would be worthy of receiving a federal subsidy! An average Canadian, to use the grocery store example once more, will readily pay out a significant portion of their income in exchange for food, but does not necessarily see the value in purchasing a pass to immerse themselves in history and art.

Perhaps governments in Canada could better engage the private sector in subsidising museums by offering tax credits to corporations who sponsor them. If the operating costs of a given museum are fixed, and the federal government offers to cover a given percentage of the costs incurred by a private corporation in sponsoring a museum, this may create long-term savings for taxpayers in situations where a government might otherwise be left to cover the operating costs in their entirety. In short, public-private partnerships should be pursued as a positive middle ground for both museums and taxpayers.

How can heritage institutions better support sustainable development and address climate change?

Thanks to our huge boreal forest, Canada is the world's second-largest carbon gas sink, and a carbon-negative country. Most Canadian museums are likely not operating significantly under budget and thus do not have spare money to spend developing things such as an institutional climate policy.

The main purview of the museum is, returning to my answer in Question 1, to preserve artefacts, not to "address climate change".

Is the digital transformation part of a sustainable solution?

Perhaps. Certainly for older museums, many of their records are only handwritten on paper, if they were recorded at all. The Information Revolution has augmented collections management in museums, but it is not without its own vulnerabilities. Whereas fire, moths, rats, and water remain as hazards, new hazards have emerged in the digital paradigm - including Internet viruses, dependency on electricity and

on a myriad of IT systems owned by foreign enterprises located outside of Canadian jurisdiction.

What are the key challenges heritage institutions will have to overcome to become more resilient and sustainable?

This appears to be a reiteration of Questions 2 & 3 in Theme 1, and Question 1 in Theme 2. See my answers for those. I will add that I believe that the demographic security of Canada is a major concern for many of us passionate about museums and about Canadian history. The population of Canada is simultaneously ageing and growing, and areas outside the major metropoli are becoming husks of what they once were. Additionally, we will be facing a major challenge in that "New Canadians" who have immigrated here in the twenty-first century are unlikely to personally value Canada's earlier history - much in the same way as Canada's European settlers generally did not look upon the traditions and cultures of the First Peoples as their own or as something to treasure. It was only after decades of persecution that the First Peoples were able to secure themselves from passive-aggressive assaults on their history and culture. As Canada continues to be drawn further into the orbit of the Asia-Pacific, I hope that Euro-Canada will be able to avoid the same persecution.

What could the Government of Canada do to help museums become more resilient and remain sustainable?

As I mentioned in Question 4 of Theme 1, I consider museums to be essentially under provincial jurisdiction, not federal. It is therefore outside the Government of Canada's purview.

What could sustainable organizations look like in the future?

I refer the reader to my previous answers in this section.

Theme 3: advancing reconciliation with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples

What could museums do to better support reconciliation with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples?

This is a very open-ended question. Certainly, museums in Canada ought not to have on display any exhibit that deliberately seeks to insult or provoke our First Peoples. Any artefacts made by our First Peoples or belonged at one time to them ought to be repatriated to the appropriate tribal authorities, or at least put on display with their explicit permission. Beyond that, no special considerations should be given.

What are the key challenges to overcome?

Historians and curators in museums tend to understand cultural sensitivities around artefacts and historical events, so I don't think that hostility towards Canadian indigenous cultures is a problem.

Something I am strongly against is the expansion of "traditional land acknowledgements" - referring to the jurisdiction one is in as "Treaty {insert number} land" instead of the municipality and/or province. It is my opinion that the implicit goal of these "traditional land acknowledgements" is to guilt Canadians from outside the First Peoples community, especially Euro-Canadians, into believing a revisionist narrative that their ancestors were pirates who may be Canadian citizens but don't really belong here.

What are successful initiatives in advancing reconciliation?

See my answers in Questions 1 & 2 of this section.

What could the Government of Canada do to facilitate reconciliation and the repatriation of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis belongings and ancestral remains?

I see no reason why the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs needs to involve itself in the responsibilities of a museum's curatorial staff. If it is determined by said staff that an indigenous-connected artefact was lawfully given to the museum, then there ought to be no problem unless the appropriate tribal authority formally requests it be returned. If the artefact was not lawfully given, consultation between the museum and relevant tribal authorities should determine the future of these artefacts.

What could the relationship between museums and First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities be in the future?

As I stated in the previous question, I do not believe that Indian Affairs Canada should involve itself in the question of First Peoples' artefacts in off-reserve museums. Nor need there be any hostility between the involved parties; such quarrels leave neither party looking better in the end.

Theme 4: embracing equity, diversity and inclusion

What could museums do to better engage and reflect the diversity of their communities?

I believe that this is already performed adequately by the vast majority of museums in Canada. Some subsections of a community actually do not want to be reflected, in that they prefer to keep their artefacts in their own institutions, such as the abovementioned tribal authorities, religious artefacts kept by church clergy, or foreign artefacts whose relevant parties desire them to be repatriated to their own country.

What are the barriers to telling diverse and inclusive stories?

A museum has to find a balance between the public's right to access information, and the right to privacy of those relevant to the artefacts. This is no easy task.

The writers of didactics for exhibits have a challenging task in that they need to keep their word count to a minimum (it has been proven in studies that most visitors to a museum don't usually read long didactics), but also need to adequately explain as much of the nuance about an artefact as possible. The slightest misinterpretation can become a powder keg for some artefacts, especially in a country with a multitude of coexisting opinions, political persuasions, and religions. Docents and tour guides are in an even tougher position, in that they are interacting with those who are viewing the exhibits and have to make instant judgments as to what is appropriate to talk about when it comes to a given artefact. Explaining a complicated machine or obscure historical item to a child may be pointless, explaining the particular relevance of a historic political background involved with an artefact may be of no interest to a non-Canadian - and those are better-case scenarios! As with the didactics, the opportunities for an interpreter to offend a visitor are almost limitless.

What are the barriers to hiring equity-deserving individuals or involving them as volunteers?

"Equity-deserving" is a matter of opinion. It involves culturally categorising people into haves and have-nots based on very limited information, and placing them into positions that, in the opinion of the categoriser, they might otherwise have not attained.

It is a fact that not everybody is capable of performing a certain job, or desires to perform a certain job. Expecting equal representation and equal outcome for all demographics in all workplaces is not realistic.

Hiring or involving people as volunteers in museums should be based on merit - which in the case of the heritage sector, is not merely about skills and workplace readiness, but also about passion. Working in the heritage sector is a calling, not a job. Not everybody is called to it.

What is working well in the promotion of equity, diversity and inclusion?

Women are very highly represented in the heritage sector in Canada.

What could the Government of Canada do to encourage equity, diversity and inclusion in museums?

I reiterate my belief that, in accordance with Section 93 of the Constitution Act, museum policy is outside federal jurisdiction.

I am strongly opposed to forcing any quotas on museum collections, displays, or staff hiring in order to "better reflect diversity" and such. It is a fact that not all cultures produce the same amount or type of one artefact as another, and attaining items for a museum's collection is usually quite random. Most museums in Canada also have no need for bilingual English-French didactics.

In a country this big and diverse, to satisfy everybody from every community in every museum is to ask the impossible from the staff.

What does a modern, inclusive heritage institution look like in 5-10 years?

See my answer for Question 1 of this section, and my answer for Question 2 in Theme 3.

Theme 5: preservation and access as core museum functions

Are concepts about preserving collections and providing access changing? If so, in what ways?

No. See my answer for Question 4 in Theme 2.

What are the key challenges when it comes to the preservation and accessibility of collections? And what is working well?

See my answer for Question 5 in Theme 1.

What could the Government of Canada do to better help museums preserve and protect their collections while making them accessible to Canadians?

Matters of education and culture ought to be left to the provincial governments. In my opinion, the Department of Canadian Heritage, as well as the Canada Council of the Arts, should be dissolved.

How might collections be managed differently in the future to make them more accessible to Canadians?

Photographing and describing all of the museum's artefacts, and making these photographs and descriptions accessible via the Internet in exchange for a fee to cover the costs of keeping and maintaining the collection, would be of indescribable value.

This concludes my submission to the Department of Canadian Heritage's 2022-23 Consultations on the renewal of the Museum Policy.

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